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Austin ISD Bond Election Forges Unlikely Alliances

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East Austin may potentially have the panacea its schools, which are battling socioeconomic disparities and low enrollment rates, need: a 1.05-billion-dollar bond.

The bond will provide for routine processes such as maintenance and technological improvements as well as the creation of new academic programs, which Austin ISD School Board members hope will encourage more families to send their children to East Austin schools. However, the bond's benefits do not extend only to East Austin students.

Schools located in Austin's west side will receive \$680 million dollars from the bond — a figure that amounts to \$11,000 dollars per student. The \$329 million dollars east side schools will receive amounts to \$13,000 per student. Though the figures on paper appear to benefit East Austin students more than their West Austin counterparts, members of the community have different interpretations.

Members of the political action committee Save East Austin Schools (SEAS) claim that West Austin schools will receive a more diverse array of programs such as STEM programs and magnet academies as opposed to only college-readiness programs, which East Austin schools are slated to obtain as a result of the bond.

According to Save East Austin School's Facebook page, the bond "(perpetuates) Austin ISD's legacy of

head of the Travis County Taxpayer Union, claims that AISD's assertion that the bond will not raise citizens' tax rates is misleading. He claims that while the city's tax rate will not rise, the rise in property values will in turn raise citizens' tax bills – what they actually end up paying in the long run.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the bond debate is not found in the intricacies of taxation and discussion on how policy can proliferate institutional racism, but in how the proposed package has forged unlikely connections between traditionally liberal and conservative camps. While the groups have completely different reasons for opposing the bond, as one is concerned primarily with social issues and the other economic, approval of the bond would prove disastrous to their central ideas and values.

The bond between the seemingly disparate groups begs the question: Can two ideologically conflicting individuals or groups work together if their end goal is the same? Is it morally unsound for a group concerned with combatting structural inequalities to align with an individual (Zimmerman) who has equated supporting same-sex marriage with supporting pedophilia? These questions become especially pressing when considered on a local level, as is the case with the proposed bond. Does it make sense for a staunch conservative, such as Zimmerman, who has connected himself to social views typically associated with the right to associate with a group that has made progressive social issues a core tenet of their philosophy? Save East Austin Schools has labelled the bond as racist, as they believe the bond gives better amenities to the less minority-populated West Austin Schools, while Zimmerman has said, "I don't think the executive decisions have anything to do with racism.... They want to close (schools) because they're empty, not because they're racist." This ideological difference begs the question: Do the ends justify the means?

Save East Austin Schools co-founder Monica Sanchez believes so. According to Sanchez, "Sometimes in politics you're going to have strange bedfellows. We're not in it to support other causes; we're in it to show voters why they shouldn't vote for the bond."

On one hand, alliances such as the one between SEAS and Zimmerman seem not only appropriate, but effective. Especially since many Austin residents may be unaware what a bond even is, mobilizing as much support as possible in favor of a particular view, no matter what the reasons are for holding this particular view, is important. In any case, this common opinion between groups can serve as an impetus for conversation between the two. Both will be more likely to at least listen to the other's side because they already share one opinion. In addition, working together is not necessarily a tacit acceptance of the other group's ideals. It is more than possible to work together while agreeing on fundamental issues at the same time.

However, those forging alliances must exercise caution. Many social inequalities are perpetuated by economic policy choices. Take tax policy for example: A proposed Republican tax overhaul initiative has the power to drastically hurt the economic opportunity of people of color. The potential bill would drastically lower taxes for the wealthiest Americans while cutting childcare assistance credits. Doing so would particularly harm the working class, which will be mainly composed of people of color by the year 2032.

For those interested in helping communities of color, aligning with those who support lower taxes for the rich as well as the discontinuation of economic policies that largely benefit minorities may prove to be a major political faux pas, even on a completely unrelated issue. Giving a group with such an opposite view of the world an extra chance to garner even more support and spread their message may prove detrimental to the other group's core tenets overall. Those helped by the group in question may even feel betrayed or doubt the group's intentions based on their new found affiliation. (Of course, this applies to conservative groups helping liberal and progressive groups as well.)

Seventy-two percent of Austin residents cast their votes in favor of the bond during the November 2017 election. Zimmerman expressed his disappointment with the election results, saying that he and the rest of the Travis County Taxpayers' Union are "greatly disappointed that taxpayers will not show up to vote and defend both themselves and the people least able to shoulder the crushing tax load."

However, all is not lost for those who worry that the bond's approval will perpetuate segregation throughout the school district. Bond supporters, such as Education Austin president Ken Zarifis, have not forgotten goals to ensure equality. According to Zarifis, "There are clearly things we have to do as a district to be inclusive and address equity, but it was very gratifying to see the support for this bond."

Austin residents, especially those who opposed the bond, will certainly be watching to see if these "things we have to do" remain among the district's top priorities.

Education

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